

# The “Unteachables” Find Their Voice

*Erin Gruwell and Her Students Turned a “Tremendous Year of Learning” into a Program with a Global Impact—The Freedom Writers Foundation*



In her travels around the country, Freedom Writers Foundation President Erin Gruwell sees that many schools are still segregated, by choice, geography, or economics. In many communities, she sees the continued existence of the “have and have-not” mentality within the education system. It’s the same mentality she encountered as a teacher in Long Beach, California, in 1994.

“It happened to be a troubling time,” she said. “There had been 126 murders in Long Beach. Snoop Doggy Dog, who grew up in Long Beach, was a big star in gangster rap, and a lot of kids were trying to emulate him, thinking that was their ticket out of town.”

The riots two years earlier in Los Angeles had brought racial tensions to a boil in schools across the country. In Long Beach, many parents pulled their children out of the public school system, and parents in neighborhoods with the worst violence sent their children to schools in safer neighborhoods. About 80 percent of the students at Woodrow Wilson High School were coming in from other neighborhoods. In some cases, students took four or five buses to get to school, only to feel that they didn’t belong.

Into this unsettled environment, and a classroom full of juniors that no one else wanted to teach, walked student teacher Erin Gruwell, idealistic, or “Pollyanna-like,” in her terms.

“On that first day, I had a rude awakening, but it was a tremendous year of learning for me,” she said.

She seized a teachable moment presented by a racist caricature of one of her students to change the dynamics and the substance of the classroom. Suddenly, she said, things had to be substantive and relevant. “We had to take the lessons of the streets and juxtapose them with man’s inhumanity to man on a global scale,” Gruwell said. “Students could see that pain is pain, and truly universal.”



Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers edited *The Freedom Writers Diary* in Room 203 at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California.

Bringing in relevant literature and bringing it to life changed everything, she said, and when the master teacher saw how much progress she was making with the students, he asked her to stay on for the full year.

## Freedom Writers Are Born

The following year, Gruwell returned to Wilson, a fully credentialed teacher, idealism intact. She had hoped to be assigned to the students she’d had the previous year to see them through to graduation, but instead was given a first-year class of 150 students who had been labeled “difficult” in middle school—students who’d been in juvenile halls and rehabilitation units, students who were coming from foster care and group homes. All of them had scored below the 25th percentile on standardized tests. Again, Gruwell said, her naïveté worked in her favor.

“I was desperate to make a connection,” she said. “I was desperate to make things matter and idealistic enough to think, ‘Why not? Why can’t things be different?’”

Through books such as *The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata’s Diary*, Gruwell’s students began to see that they could relate to others’ experiences. They began to write anonymous journals about their own lives, and dubbed themselves the Freedom Writers after learning



about the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights Movement. Under Gruwell's guidance, the Freedom Writers continued to grow and bond with each other, and to embrace education. Every one of these students, who'd been labeled "unteachable" and "stupid," graduated. Many of them went on to college.

## The Foundation

The original Freedom Writers were the first in their families to graduate from high school, and the first to go to college. Wanting to support them in their journeys, Gruwell started a nonprofit organization in 1997 to provide scholarships and stay connected. With the publication in 1999 of *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*, the scope of the Freedom Writers Foundation became global.

Now, instead of teaching students in the classroom, Gruwell travels the world sharing the Freedom Writers' story with diverse audiences.

In juvenile halls and prisons, she encourages teens to make positive changes in their lives. She leads institutes for language arts teachers who will take the Freedom Writers model back to their own classrooms. There are now 233 Freedom Writers teachers in all 50 states and in Canada. She urges superintendents, school boards, and other administrators to remove the obstacles that teachers can encounter in trying to implement innovative programs. In meetings with corporate executives, she promotes partnerships with and financial support of teachers and schools in their communities.

Much to Gruwell's great joy, she is surrounded at work by familiar faces.

"As we started to expand, I realized that the core people who would be invested in the Foundation's growth would be the original Freedom Writers," she said. "I'm so blessed that every day when I come to work, they are my colleagues and my employees."

Like Gruwell, the Freedom Writers go on speaking engagements and participate in the teacher institutes. They also read the essays written by scholarship applicants, interview the students, and select the recipients.

## A Burden and a Blessing

Gruwell says she revels in the fact that the Freedom Writers have become dynamic civil rights activists in their own right.

"I like to say that I've created monsters," she said. "They really think that they can change the world, and I get to be a cheerleader on the side, coaching and educating them, steering them in the right direction, and sitting back to marvel at what they say and how they say it and who they inspire in the process."

They regularly receive letters and email messages from teenagers who say they were contemplating suicide before reading *The Freedom Writers Diary*, but found in it that they were not alone. They get many letters from young people who are incarcerated, who say things such as, "I feel like I'm a bird in a cage, but this book gave me wings, and I feel like I can soar." The letters are both heart-wrenching and inspiring, Gruwell says.

Her favorite line from a 2007 film based on the book is something her father once said to her: You are blessed with a burden.

"It is a burden and it's overwhelming and I struggle to this day to understand how this burden was bestowed upon me," she said. "But I will never underestimate the blessing that comes with it."

One of the blessings, Gruwell says, was the invitation to address teachers at the NCTE Annual Convention in Orlando.

"This conference is to me the most meaningful and special conference I've ever done," she said. "I've wished for and wanted this opportunity for years.

English language arts teachers are some

of the best change agents because they believe in the power of the written word, and in helping each and every reader to find their own voice and write their own story."

Since the publication of *The Freedom Writers Diary*, Gruwell has written two other books: *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from The Freedom Writers*, which came out in 2008, and *Teaching Hope: Stories from the Freedom Writer Teachers and Erin Gruwell*, published in 2009. She is currently working on a documentary which she hopes will be the next step in telling the story of the Freedom Writers.

Gruwell says she has always felt that she was just an ordinary teacher who had an extraordinary experience, and she never envisioned where it would lead her and her students.

"I'm really still in the moment and appreciating the moment, and I'm learning a lot," she said. "I've always said I'm a pretty good teacher and a great student, so I'm still a student in all of this."

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